

The Nagging Dark

by GenieMaster

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Summary: When Boss' past comes back to haunt him, the Ham-Hams find themselves caught up in it as well...How will Boss redeem himself and protect those he loves? Rated for some violence, language, and sexual references.

1. Nightmare

Hey all! Geniemaster is officially back in action (for now, at least). This fic is different from anything else I've written, because there's really going to be very little, if any, humor in it, and it's very serious and all that. I've had the concept in my mind for awhile about doing a fic about Boss' past because I thought hey, all the other Ham-Hams are domestic so you know, it's not like they have any mystery surrounding them but hey, I wonder what Boss' life was like before he met any of them? Actually I had already started this fic a long time ago, written about 50 pages or so and somehow I accidentally deleted it or something. But I started it over, so anywayâ€|here it is. I thrive on reviews. Flames welcome as well.

By the way, the title of this fic is based on the song "The Nagging Dark" by John Hiatt, who I unfortunately do not own. It was partially what gave me the inspiration for this fic, and the lyrics are interspersed throughout this chapter.

* * *

><p>How fast you gonna run away from this one?</p>

Anywhere but here, you wanna disappear

To the next daylight where everything's right

It's always somewhere else you're gonna fix yourself

Once shame and guilt have made their markâ€|

You can't run away from the nagging dark
You carry it everywhere in your heart
It finishes everything that you start
You can't run away from the nagging dark

* * *

><p>"Boss, please! Make them stop! Boss!"</p>

He heard her call to him, her voice pleading, desperate, but he could not see her, nor make out anything else around him. Only a blur of colors, dark, terrible colors, blacks and reds, the colors of death.

"Do something! Boss, please! Please!"

She was crying now, sobbing. He tried to move, to do something, as she asked, but it seemed he was rooted to the spot. His head started to throb as the colors continued to swirl around him.

"Boss! They're going to kill him! Please!"

He tried to call out her name, but his voice stuck in his throat. He was a helpless bystander to the terror he was witnesssing.

"They're killing him! Boss! PLEASE!"

The sound of her cries, the swirl of colors, the pain, it was all overwhelming him. It was all mixed together, everything became nothing, and he saw it begin to fade. For one split second he could swear he saw her face, he could see the empty, horrible look in her eyes as she came to realize he could not help her...

* * *

><p>How much it gonna cost when everything's lost?</p>

What a price you'd pay just to feel some way
Cuz your heart is stone ground down to the bone
All your flesh and blood is just ashes and mud
Feels like your soul's been blown apartâ€|
You can't run away from the nagging dark
You carry it everywhere in your heart
It finishes everything that you start
You can't run away from the nagging dark

* * *

><p>Boss sat bolt upright in his bed in a cold sweat. His breath was

coming in quick gasps, and he felt dizzy and lightheaded. Tonight marked the third night in a row that he had been experiencing these nightmares. But he couldn't understand why. It had been two years since that fateful afternoon; two years had passed without incident since he had last seen her face, since he had held her against himself and felt her warmth and whispered his goodbye. The memories had faded since then, but now they were returning, full force, to his dreams. He could think about nothing else. He was losing sleep, and appetite.<p>

He lifted his paws to his face and allowed his breathing to slow. Then he wiped some of the sweat away and swung himself out of bed. What he needed more than anything right now was a walk through the soft night air to help clear his mind, although he knew it wouldn't.

"The night holds many secrets," Snoozer mumbled as Boss made his way from his bedroom to the door. Boss merely grunted in reply.

"Be careful," Snoozer warned, then continued snoring.

"Thanks," Boss sighed, then shook his head and left.

* * *

><p>How far can you see? Will you ever be free?<p>

Through the blackest night you still hold on tight

Hope is your finest work

It's your finest work

Hope is your finest work of artâ€!

You can't run away from the nagging dark

You carry it everywhere in your heart

It finishes everything that you start

You can't run away from the nagging dark

* * *

><p>Once he was outside, Boss took a deep breath, letting the cool air soothe him. Then he wandered. He didn't care where he was going; he could always find his way back, so he simply let his mind go free and let his feet take him wherever they would. The cold was his friend, the night was his friend, and these woods were his friend.<p>

However, he hadn't gone far when he heard footsteps behind him.

He froze in place.

"Who's there?" he asked the darkness, without turning around. The only reply he got was a cackle, a burst of demonic laughter that sent chills down his spine.

"What do you want?" Boss tried again. He turned around, but no one was there. Now he heard rustling in the bushes around him, and he kept turning, trying to keep up with the noise.

Suddenly, everything around him started to blur. His throbbing headache returned with a vengeance. He stopped moving and put a paw to his forehead, his pulse quickening with every breath he took.

Then he looked up and shouted, "SHOW YOURSELF!"

Another rustle, a few hurried footsteps, and then -

Boss breathed in sharply as he felt the blade of a knife at his throat, just barely touching his fur.

"Long time, no see, Boss," a gruff voice mused behind him, and suddenly the woods around him were full of crazed laughter.

Boss gulped.

"Scuzz," he murmured. His nightmares were taking shape around him as he once again stood helpless.

* * *

><p>You can't run away from the nagging dark</p>

You carry it everywhere in your heart

It finishes everything that you start

You can't run away from the nagging dark

* * *

><p>Short first chapter, I know, but what do you think? Review review review!</p>

Also, I would like to know who is still interested in and / or wants to be a character in "The Untold Hamtaro." I will continue writing it as long as I know people will still read in.

Additionally, I am in the process of writing another fic with Howdy and Dexter as the main characters, as requested by Ringa Ham. Should be up soon.

Rememberâ€|.review!

2. Scuzz

Thanks to all who reviewed chapter one! I wasn't sure how much people would like this fic, but the reviews I got were very inspiring! Thanks again to all of you, I love you guys, and I promise I will work on getting the next chapter of "The Untold Hamtaro" up soon!

* * *

><p>"You remember me!" The knife was drawn away and a figure appeared

in front of Boss. It was a dark gray hamster, a mite shorter than Boss, with a pronounced scar running straight down the middle of his face. Most of his left ear was missing, and his eyes were dark and mean. At his waist hung a small sheath, concealing his blade. "I'm so touched," he added, a smirk crossing his face.<p>

"Why are you here?" Boss demanded. "Why now?"

"I gave you quite a generous head start," Scuzz sniggered, "but I've been on your trail for the past few months, and now I've got you where I want you. And you know very well why I'm here: to take what's rightfully mine."

"You're full of it," Boss growled, trying to conceal his fear. "She was never yours; and besides, we were separated those two years ago. I haven't seen her since. So leave me in peace." He said the words boldly, although he knew Scuzz was not that easily persuaded.

Scuzz laughed. "Leave you in peace, you say? After all the work I put towards finding you? Oh, ho ho, no. No." He snapped his fingers, and five other figures emerged from the shadows.

"I'd like you to meet the other CATS," Scuzz continued. "I'm their leader, now, you see. This is Rock," - he motioned to a tall, broad-shouldered gray hamster with white stripes below his ears - "Chez," - a short but mean-looking yellow-and-orange hamster - "Mitch," - a dark brown hamster of medium stature with a shock of black hair at the top of his head - "and Ralph," - a white hamster with red eyes.

"Oh yes," Scuzz rambled on, "and let us not forget Rei." Rei was a short, timid-looking, tan-colored hamster, obviously younger than the others, with soft, innocent features. "He's our newest member, still learning our ways." Scuzz ruffled Rei's short brown hair. Rei winced.

Something clicked in Boss' mind when he saw Rei. Something about him was familiar, although he was sure he had never seen the youngster before. Something about his eyes. They reminded him of someone he once knew.

"Now, on to business," Scuzz continued. "I'll tell you exactly why I'm here. I want Bijou."

All of the color left in Boss' face drained away. His heart and his mind were racing; Scuzz had hit him straight in his weak spot.

"B-Bijou," Boss stammered. "No! Your quarrel is with me, Scuzz! What do you want with her? And - and how do you know about her anyway?"

Scuzz chuckled. "Do you really think I'd go into this without first arming myself with knowledge? I've been spying on you these past three days, studying your habits. And, frankly, you make it quite obvious that you're in love with this girl."

Boss took a deep breath. Three days. That was why he'd been having those nightmares. Although he hadn't realized Scuzz was there, something in his subconscious must have felt his presence,

somewhere...

"What's it to you?" Boss managed to say, then cringed at the way his voice had betrayed his weakness.

"Doesn't it make sense?" Scuzz asked. "It's called revenge. You took my love away from me. So I shall do the same to you."

"She was not your love!" Boss shouted. "She didn't love you! She saw you for what you were, you son of a bitch!"

Scuzz snapped his fingers again. Ralph and Mitch leapt forward, each taking one of Boss' arms; then Rock cracked his knuckles and delivered a hard punch straight to Boss' stomach.

Boss clenched his teeth, but endured the searing pain without a sound.

"No one," Scuzz muttered, anger now presenting itself in his voice, "but no one talks to the leader of the CATS that way. No one."

Despite the pain in his gut, Boss chuckled and repeated, "You son of a bitch."

Rock delivered another blow; Boss grunted this time, feeling the sting course through his body.

"You're stubborn," Scuzz growled. "When will you learn? You can't best me. So here's my proposal. You will take me to Bijou. She will become mine. And I shall then leave you in peace."

"You won't come within ten miles of Bijou as long as I'm around," Boss snarled, the rage boiling inside him slowly replacing the fear in his heart.

"I can kill you now, you know," was Scuzz's reply, and to demonstrate he unsheathed his knife, tossed it into the air and skillfully caught it by the handle with his other paw.

"Go ahead," Boss growled. "Of course you wouldn't understand the concept of sacrificing oneself for a loved one, seeing as you have no loved ones."

"You do realize," Scuzz said, his eyes narrowing, "that even if I do kill you now, I can still get to Bijou?"

"I've spent enough time with you to know how your mind works," Boss scoffed, "and that you won't kill me, at least not now, because you want me to be the one who delivers Bijou to you. Well, forget it. There's nothing you can do to convince me."

"Don't push your luck," Scuzz snarled, pointing the blade directly between Boss' eyes. "I know you're afraid, and I am well-versed in manipulating fear."

"I'm not afraid of you!" Boss shouted, and he meant it. He wasn't scared anymore; all he could think about was losing Bijou, and he wasn't going to let that happen.

Scuzz grunted and sheathed his blade.

"I can see you're not going to cooperate," he murmured, "but I have my ways, so don't think this is the end of it. Chez, would you do the honors, please?"

Before he knew what was happening, Boss felt a sudden, intense pain in the back of his head, delivered by some large, blunt object, and everything around him faded into nothing.

* * *

><p>The morning sunlight streaming through the trees awoke Boss the next morning. He was lying on his back in the middle of the woods; he imagined he had been sleepwalking until he remembered what had happened that night. For a while, he couldn't decide if it had been another nightmare, or if it had actually happened, until he sat up and rubbed the back of his head. It still hurt like hell.</p>

"Damn," Boss muttered. "Scuzz...Damn it, I need to warn Bijou. And everyone else, for that matter! No...I can't let them know about all of this...How will I...uurrrghhh!" He stood up and rubbed his eyes with his paws, then opened them and looked towards the sky. The sun was making its way slowly up through the trees; it looked to be about ten o' clock. By this time, Bijou would most likely already be at the clubhouse; Boss turned and, ignoring the pain in his head, ran in the direction of his home.

* * *

><p>The door of the clubhouse burst open. Eleven warm faces looked up expectantly.</p>

"Boss!" Hamtaro greeted affectionately, a smile spreading across his face, "where've you been? We were all wondering why you weren't here."

"It's...uh..." Boss started, but before he could finish, Maxwell was at his side with a paw to his forehead.

"Hmmm," Maxwell murmured, "you do feel a tad warm. I was thinking you didn't look so good, like maybe you were coming down with something...You're a little pale as well. How do you feel?"

Boss shook his head, somewhat annoyed with this sudden onslaught of attention. The only attention he wanted right now was from Bijou, and what he needed to tell her was something he wanted no one else to hear. However, as he looked around the room, he could find no trace of her anywhere. But he took advantage of Maxwell's doctoring to make an excuse for running all the others out of the clubhouse.

"I...don't feel well, you're right, Max," Boss replied, and it was the truth, although it definitely wasn't a simple fever that had Boss feeling down. "I think I should get some rest...I'd appreciate it if you'd all go home...In fact, why don't you just stay home for a few days, give me some time to recuperate and then come back..." He was somewhat surprised when the others agreed without question, and one by one left him to himself. This was, without a doubt in Boss' mind, the best thing to do right now, as they would all be safer in their

own homes. He didn't know what Scuzz might be planning next; all he knew was that Scuzz would use any and all available resources to bring him to his knees, and that however sordid it seemed, his friends were among those resources. Though Boss hated to give him credit for such things, he knew that Scuzz was the type of guy who could read one's weaknesses easily, and for a long while Scuzz had mocked him for having such a soft spot for his fellow hamsters - a "weak point," as Scuzz called it, but ultimately it was one of Boss' greatest strengths as well.

* * *

><p>Bijou had awoken late that morning and was now rushing off to the clubhouse, eager to discover what was in store for her that day. But her jubilant expression was replaced with a concerned one when she saw Hamtaro coming towards her, a frown on his face. She slowed to a walk as he continued forward; once he reached her, he sighed and began to explain the situation.</p>

"Boss doesn't want us around right now," Hamtaro muttered. "He says he doesn't feel well, and we're best leaving him alone for the next few days, at least." He watched the concerned look on Bijou's face intensify.

"But...we can still have fun, if you want," Hamtaro continued. "We could...I don't know...play a game or something. Maybe collect nuts for Boss. That would cheer him up, right?"

Bijou nodded, and agreed. "Oui, that is a good idea," she said. "I'm sure he would appreciate it."

"Great!" Hamtaro said. "Let's go!"

"No."

The two of them looked around and saw none other than Boss himself only a few feet away. His face was still pale, but his expression empty of emotion.

"Boss?" Hamtaro asked. "I thought you were staying home. You said you didn't feel well."

Boss grunted and replied, "There's something important I need to talk to Bijou about. Go home, Hamtaro. It's for your own good."

Hamtaro and Bijou both looked utterly surprised. Neither moved, not quite sure of what was going on.

"Bijou," Boss said, taking her paws, "go back inside. I'll speak to you there, in private." He turned to Hamtaro. "Didn't you hear me? Go home."

Hamtaro frowned. This wasn't like Boss at all. However, he slowly turned and began walking in the direction of his house, while Bijou did as she was told and scampered inside, closely followed by Boss.

Once they were inside, Boss sighed and looked straight into Bijou's eyes.

"Bijou, I'm so sorry," he told her. She blinked, confused.

"Sorry?" she asked. "For...what?"

"I...can't explain right now," he answered. "But whatever you do, you cannot leave this house. Stay in your cage. Don't even go to the window. You must stay hidden."

Bijou gasped. "But Boss...why? Whatever for?"

Boss put a paw to his face and sighed. "I'll explain it all later, once things have settled down," he replied. "But I will tell you this: you are in danger."

Bijou put her paws to her face and began to tremble. She could see the seriousness in Boss' expression, a grave seriousness that she had never seen before. It scared her more than anything she had ever witnessed.

Boss took her paws and tried to comfort her.

"Just do as I say," he told her, "and everything will be alright, I promise." This was the first time Boss had made a promise he knew he very well might not be able to keep.

She looked back at him with those deep blue eyes of hers, and he did something he knew he would not regret.

"In case," he began, "just in case I never have the chance again..." and without another word he leaned down and kissed her.

* * *

><p>Just a quick note to my readers, I know so far this is heading in the direction of Boss+Bijou but actually I'm not sure how it's going to turn out at this pointâ€|I can't decide whether to make it Hamtar+Boss or Boss+Bijou, becauseâ€|well, I don't want to give anything away so just review and we'll see how it goes!<p>

3. Ransom

Hey everyone! For those of you who don't know me...which is probably most of you...I used to be fairly active on about 4 years ago. Then college happened. I'm still in college (yes, I am an adult who likes Hamtar...wanna fight about it?), but I found time to write again, and I've really been wanting to finish this particular story (which really I've barely even started!).

So start at chapter 1, give it a read and let me know what you think so far.

And if anyone is reading this that remembers me from back in the day â€“ holla!

-Genie

* * *

><p>Bijou felt the heat rising in her cheeks as she watched Boss

disappear back in the direction of the clubhouse. She had always known that Boss liked her, but he had never been so forward about it...Bijou wasn't quite sure how to feel. She had always considered Boss to be one of her best friends, a big brother almost...But this? And what was he talking about, her being in danger? Having to stay home, hide herself? She was overwhelmed and confused and didn't know where to turn. So she sat down on the windowsill, buried her head in her paws and burst into tears.<p>

"Don't cry! Please don't cry!"

Bijou looked up, startled. The tears were flowing freely from her eyes and clouding her vision, but she immediately recognized the orange and white blur making its way across the branches outside her window.

Hamtaro leapt deftly from the tree onto the windowsill and sat down next to Bijou. He lifted a paw to wipe away an errant tear but instead found himself locked in the tightest embrace he'd ever felt.

"Hamtaro, I am so scared!" Bijou cried, her tears now soaking into his fur.

"I know, Bijou. I heard everything Boss told you." He returned her embrace and gently stroked her back with one paw. "It's going to be ok. I'm here for you."

"No, Hamtaro," Bijou said, sitting up and pushing him back. "You must leave. If I am in danger, then â€“ then so are you if you stay here!"

Hamtaro looked surprised at the sudden outburst, but he could see that Bijou meant what she said. Nonetheless, he couldn't stand the thought of leaving her alone in this ordeal. "I can't leave you, Bijou," he replied. "If you are in danger, I should be here to protect you!"

"Please," Bijou whimpered, her voice small and choking with tears. "Please, Hamtaro. You have to leave." She stood up, took him by the paw and helped him to his feet. "You â€“ you can come check on me tomorrow if it makes you feel better. But for now, I need to be alone."

Hamtaro didn't want to argue any further, so he resigned himself to defeat. "I'll be back tomorrow, and I'll bring you something to cheer you up, too," he told her, feeling tears welling up behind his eyes as he spoke. "Just...look out for yourself, ok?"

"I will, Hamtaro." She raised a paw to her lips, then pressed it gently against his cheek. "I will."

* * *

><p>It was late in the evening, and Boss was pacing the floor of the clubhouse, mumbling to himself and trying to sort out everything that was happening. Bijou was safe, for now; but Scuzz would be back, no doubt, and who knew what plans he had in store?<p>

"No rest for the weary," Snoozer pointed out, enigmatic as

always.

"No rest indeed," Boss replied, sighing deeply and plopping himself into his easy chair. There was no way he'd be able to sleep tonight. Besides, even if he did fall asleep, he'd only dream those horrible dreams again.

"Company's here," Snoozer mumbled after a brief pause.

"Eh?" Boss sat up straight and looked around at the sleeping hamster.
"What are you—"

But he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

Boss froze, realizing immediately who was waiting behind the door. He sank back down in the chair and remained as still as possible, hoping that Scuzz would think he was simply not at home and leave him in peace.

But it was not to be. "Boss, I know you're in there," the gruff voice came, followed by a series of more insistent knocks. "Open the damn door. You're not fooling anyone."

"Get out of here!" Boss replied, raising his voice in an attempt to conceal the fear in it.

"Boss, open this door or so help me God I will break it down," Scuzz answered, this time in a sing-song voice. God, how Boss hated that. Scuzz always seemed to have so much fun being evil.

Hesitantly, his heart pounding in his chest, Boss crept towards the door and put a tentative paw on the knob.

"That's right," Scuzz jeered from the other side of the door. "Now open up."

Boss drew a deep breath and opened the door just enough to see Scuzz's giant grin and leering eyes looking back at him.

"What do you want?" Boss asked him, his voice shaking.

"You already know what I want," Scuzz replied, his grin widening.

"And you know the answer!" Boss growled back. "I'm not going to give Bijou to you. Not now, not ever. I would sooner die a thousand horrible deaths."

"Well, that can be arranged," Scuzz chuckled. "But first things first. You will take me to her. Tonight. Now."

"Never!" Boss shouted, and opened the door just enough so that he could slam it in Scuzz's face, a rather desperate attempt to appear dominant.

"Oh no?" Scuzz responded, his voice clearly audible, if somewhat muffled, from the other side of the door. "I think I can change your mind."

Boss' head was swimming, his mind racing, his heart skipping every other beat. He couldn't bear to face Scuzz again " but then, what choice did he have?

He opened the door again, this time all the way, and stared Scuzz squarely in the eye, summoning all of his courage. "How do you plan on doing that?" he asked.

"Well," Scuzz grinned enthusiastically, obviously quite pleased with himself, "what if I made you an offer you simply couldn't refuse? A sort of two-for-one deal?"

Boss didn't like the sound of this.

* * *

><p>Night had fallen, and with it Bijou - into a fretful sleep. She was tossing and turning, trying to rid her mind of images of terrifying and evil things.</p>

It was a warm summer's evening, and Maria had left the window open. Wind was blowing against the curtains, making eerie noises and dreadful shadows that invaded Bijou's dreams. All of a sudden, the sound of paws on the windowsill awakened Bijou from her sleep " she sat bolt upright and let out a yelp of terror as a dark figure, wrapped in a hooded cloak, appeared before her.

"Hush!" the figure commanded in a soft, almost motherly voice. She lifted a paw to her lips to indicate silence.

Bijou was trembling, but the stranger reached out a paw and placed it on her arm to calm her. "I am not going to hurt you," she assured Bijou. "I'm here to protect you. You aren't safe here."

"But " but I was told " Boss told me that I was only safe if I stayed here! I can't leave!"

"Boss didn't know what was in store," the stranger replied. "If he had seen this coming, I'm sure he would have done more to protect you. It's easy to underestimate the forces of evil when you've got good on your side."

"What " what do you mean?" Bijou whimpered, still shaking from the shock of it all.

"All will be explained in good time," the stranger replied, "but for now we must leave."

"Wait!" Bijou cried as the stranger took her paw and began to lead her toward the window. "How do I know I can trust you?"

The stranger paused. Her face was invisible beneath the hood of her cloak, save for a soft smile that crossed her lips. Without a word, she lifted Bijou's paw to her own face and held it against her cheek.

No words were needed " Bijou knew she was in good hands.

* * *

><p>"So, Boss, ready to hear what we've got to offer you tonight?" Scuzz asked, sounding more like a game show host than the despicable cur that he was.</p>

Of course he wasn't ready. So he simply stood there, rooted to the spot, drawing short, anxious breaths. Like a game show contestant waiting to hear what he's won. Except there was terror in his eyes rather than excitement.

Scuzz smiled that awful, evil grin of his and snapped his fingers. From the darkness beyond them, four figures emerged. Rock and Mitch, two of Scuzz's minions, marched forward, flanking two other hamsters that Boss knew all too well.

"Friends of yours?" Scuzz mused with a hateful little chuckle.

"Howdy...Dexter..." Boss stammered. Their paws were bound behind their backs, and Rock and Mitch had a firm grasp on their upper arms. They looked like they'd been through hell already â€“ matted fur, scrapes and bruises, and a pained expression in their eyes told Boss more than he needed to know.

"Help," Howdy gasped, the desperation in his voice enough to break Boss's heart.

* * *

><p>That's chapter 3! I've already got most of chapter 4 done too, but not gonna upload it until I get some reviews.</p>

Thanks for reading!

Until next time,

Genie

4. Beautiful Stranger

Hey folks, sorry for the long hiatus on this! Satu-Suzu, Duckie P.O.V., MSS123, thanks for your reviews! Duckie â€“ I know, it is all still very confusing at this point. But as you'll see at the end of this chapter, things will start to be explained soon! So hopefully if you keep reading you'll enjoy it more â€“ and I promise to have the next chapter up within the nextâ€|let's sayâ€|2 weeks. That's my goal.

Yay! Thanks guys. Hope you enjoy this chapter.

* * *

><p>Boss couldn't even think. He felt rage boiling inside him, and without warning he sprang forward, eager to free his friends from his enemy's grasp. But Scuzz was quick to react, unsheathing his blade and raising it in front of Boss so that he stopped just short of piercing his own heart.</p>

"Let them go!" Boss demanded, anger now flooding away all of the fear he had felt earlier. "They're innocent bystanders! This is between

you and me, Scuzz, they have nothing to do with it!"

"Collateral damage, I suppose," Scuzz replied, tracing the tip of his blade across Boss's chest. "But you know, I would be more than happy to let them go. If you'll oblige my wishes first."

"I â€“ I can't!" Boss stammered, anguish now mixing with the anger he felt so passionately.

"Well, it's either Bijou, or these two," Scuzz mused, turning to his captives. "And you know, I don't really have any use for these two. So I guess, if you aren't ready to comply with my demands, I should just get rid of them." A grin spread across his face as he draped one arm around Dexter's shoulders and with the other paw, raised his blade to Dexter's throat.

"Oh god oh god oh god," Dexter whimpered, eyes focused on the knife hovering uncomfortably close to his jugular vein.

"Get the hell away from him!" Howdy shouted, trying to wrestle free of Rock's grip.

"Or what?" Scuzz laughed. "You'll spit on me?"

He did.

"You arrogant little bastard," Scuzz growled, lowering his blade to wipe the spit from his cheek. Then he lunged at Howdy, blade drawn and ready to draw blood, but he was stopped abruptly mid-strike when Boss grabbed his arm.

"Don't hurt them," he pleaded, releasing Scuzz's arm. "I'll take you to Bijou. Just â€“ don't hurt them anymore."

"Wait, Boss, you can't just give up like that!" Dexter shouted. "I'm willing to die for Bijou's sake. And I know that means you'd be willing to die for her a thousand times over! You can't just give up that easily!"

"Then what? I let them kill you?" Boss asked, tears welling in his eyes. "They'll do it. They don't even need a reason."

"To hell with them!" Howdy joined in. "And to hell with me, I guess, if that's where I'm headed. But you can't just give Bijou to 'em."

"Don't you get it? I don't have a choice in this. Your blood will be on my paws if I let them kill you! I can't live with that! You're two of my best friends in the whole world!"

"But you love Bijou." Dexter's eyes were brimming with tears as well. "How can you -" He stopped abruptly, feeling the sharp point of a knife at his back.

"Sorry to interrupt," Scuzz smiled. "But we really should get this show on the road. Boss, lead the way. Mitch, Rock, fall in behind and watch the hostages."

"Yes sir," the two minions replied, roughly taking hold of Howdy and Dexter's arms again. Boss breathed in and closed his eyes, hoping

against all hope that Bijou wouldn't be at home. But he had told her to stay there himself. He'd sealed her fate. Oh, cruel irony.

Boss opened his eyes, now red from the tears, and pushed his way past Mitch and Rock, then turned to look back at Howdy and Dexter.

"I'm so sorry this is happening," he whispered. "No one was supposed to get hurt. If we get out of this alive, I owe you guys big time."

Howdy attempted a smile. "If you can get us out of this alive, I think we can call it even."

* * *

><p>The night was clear and warm, and the moon was bright enough to light a path through the forest. It seemed the trek to Bijou's house would be an easy one tonight. Scuzz was counting on it; Boss was dreading it. As he led the group ever closer to their destination, his mind was racing, trying to conceive any possible means of foiling Scuzz's plan. He couldn't simply lead them in the wrong direction â€“ Scuzz would know, because Scuzz knew where Bijou lived. And he didn't want to risk doing anything rash for fear that further harm would befall Howdy or Dexter as a result.</p>

"Walk faster!" Scuzz commanded at length. "You're dragging your feet, Boss. As if you don't want us to get there before daybreak."

At the spurring of Scuzz's blade, Boss increased his pace, though he knew it meant he'd only have to face the inevitable even sooner. After a short while, he and Scuzz were a fair distance ahead of Mitch, Rock, Howdy and Dexter and paying little mind to them. They were both focused solely on what lay ahead.

Mitch and Rock were making no real concerted efforts to keep up with Scuzz, partly out of sheer laziness, and partly because Howdy and Dexter wanted nothing more than to be by Boss's side. But they were at the mercy of Mitch and Rock's unyielding grip, keeping them a good distance behind.

Mitch and Rock had amused themselves for the first part of the walk by finding as many creative ways as they could to threaten Howdy and Dexter. But they'd eventually grown weary of those pursuits, especially seeing as how Scuzz had promised to set the two of them free once Boss's end of the bargain was fulfilled (although Scuzz's word wasn't good for much), and they had resigned themselves to small talk and petty conversation.

"Nice night tonight," Rock mused, gazing heavenward. "Lots of stars too."

"Mmhmm," Mitch responded. Then he yawned.

"You know, you guys don't really seem all that bad," Howdy interjected. "At least, not compared to that jackass you take orders from. Why is it you let him boss you around?"

Rock raised a questioning eyebrow and seemed ready to respond when a dark figure draped in a hooded cloak suddenly emerged from the shadows before them. Boss and Scuzz were too far ahead to

notice.

"Who the hell are you?" Mitch demanded.

Without a word, the stranger â€“ quick as lightning â€“ grabbed both Mitch and Rock by the nape of the neck and yanked hard so that their heads collided, instantly knocking them both unconscious, before either had a chance to react.

"Holy shit!" Howdy stammered.

Dexter was about to say something similar when the stranger clamped a paw over his mouth.

"Don't move," the stranger whispered, in a very feminine voice. Then she pulled something out from beneath the cloak she was wearing.

Dexter saw a glint of metal â€“ a knife. Bracing for the worst, he squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the impact of blade on flesh. Instead, he immediately felt the ropes at his wrists loosen and fall to the ground. By the time he opened his eyes the stranger had already finished cutting Howdy's bonds as well.

"Geez, what are you?" Howdy asked of the stranger, massaging his chafed wrists. "Some kind of ninja angel?"

She smiled, put a finger to her lips, then ran straight towards Scuzz and Boss. As she approached them, she reached under her cloak and withdrew something small and round.

Scuzz turned on his heel when he heard the sound of footsteps quickly approaching. He saw the hooded figure coming towards him and reached for his blade â€“ but before he could pull it from its sheath, she hurled the spherical object toward the ground in front of him and it erupted in a cloud of dust and vapor.

As Scuzz was overtaken by a fit of coughs, the stranger grabbed Boss's paw and pulled him away. "Cover your mouth!" she whispered, and he did as instructed. Then she pulled the collar of her hood up over her own mouth as the dust cloud spread and began to run, taking Boss with her.

When they were a safe distance away, she stopped running, released Boss's paw and looked back to where Scuzz had been. The dust had begun to settle, and Scuzz was now lying motionless on the ground.

"Did you â€“ poison him?" Boss asked.

"Sort of," she replied. "But he's not dead, only unconscious. And not for too long, either, so we can't just stand around. Come on, let's find your friends and get out of here." She turned back and headed towards Howdy and Dexter, who were gaping at her in utter awe.

"What?" she chuckled, seeing their surprised looks. "Never met a woman who can defend herself before?"

"And save everyone else around her from certain doom..." Boss added,

following her closely. "Can I ask...who are you, anyway?"

She turned to him then, and, without a word, lifted the hood of her cloak and let it fall behind her. She smiled warmly, watching Boss's expression change to a mixture of astonishment and joy.

She was a beautiful hamster with golden-brown fur and delicate features. Her eyes were a deep shade of lavender, and several strands of her fur fell softly over her right eye. She looked to be about Boss's age, perhaps a little older.

"A-Amy?" Boss stuttered, gazing into her eyes like they were crystal balls.

She nodded, and that was all Boss needed. He wrapped her in his arms and started bawling like a baby; she returned the embrace, gently stroking his back as his tears soaked into her fur.

"I...I missed you...so much!" Boss said between sobs. "I thought I'd never...never see you again!"

"I know," she told him, then pushed him back, releasing herself from the embrace. "But I'm here now. First things first, though -- we need to get to shelter before Scuzz wakes up. Bijou is safe. I'll take you to her."

Boss nodded and turned to Howdy and Dexter, who both wore curious and confused expressions. "I'll tell you guys everything once we're safe," he said. "Let's go."

* * *

><p>Well, what do you think so far? Review please!</p>

Love & peace,

Genie

5. The Way Things Were

Woo, an update! Sorry it's been so long. But this week also happens to be my spring break, and I will spend a considerable amount of time writing. So maybe if you're lucky I'll be able to hammer out another chapter by the end of the week.

I'm also still working on the next chapter for Closer to Home, which I should also have up sometime this week. I've been struggling to write the current chapter because it's so boring, and I keep skipping ahead to write the parts that I want to write, even though they come much later--(basically, it's because I have recently become a crazy Howdy+Dexter fangirl. Which you will discover for yourself if you happen to read Closer to Home.).

Anyway, let's get on with this fic--this chapter is more or less the "explaining stuff" chapter, so if you've been wondering what the hell is going on in this fic, hopefully by the end of this chapter you'll have some notion of the convoluted storyline that was mulling about in my head when I began writing it. If you get to the end of this chapter and things are still unclear, please let me know in your

review, so I can make sure everything is clarified in the next chapter.

Oh, and just a quick warning: there's a bit of, how to say, 'uncomfortable' subject matter in this chapter (*cough*rape*cough*). Nothing explicit, but implied. Just letting you know.

And now, onward!

-Genie

* * *

><p>After what seemed like forever, Amy's brisk pace slowed and she raised a paw, signaling to the others that they had reached their destination. She pushed her way through a group of small bushes and motioned for the others to follow her. In the center of the group of bushes was a hole in the ground, leading down to a small underground burrow.</p>

"It's dark down there, and there isn't a whole lot of room," she told them. "But it will have to do for the night. We should be safe from Scuzz and his gang, until tomorrow at least." With that, she began to climb down into the burrow. Boss, Howdy and Dexter followed suit.

Beneath the surface, the burrow soon opened up into a small chamber, large enough for all of them to fit reasonably comfortably. Amy took a match from a small pouch that she carried at her waist and struck it, engulfing the small chamber in light. Boss's eyes were instantly drawn to the small white ball of fur curled up against the wall.

"Bijou?" Boss asked tentatively. Sure enough, the familiar face soon appeared, blinking at the light, evidently having just awoken. When she saw Boss standing before her, she leapt to her feet and threw her arms around him.

"Boss!" she cried. "I am so frightened. What is happening? Why are we hiding? I do not understand." She was sobbing, her tiny body trembling.

"An explanation would be nice," Dexter agreed. "Who exactly is this Scuzz character? And what does he want with Bijou?"

Boss sighed. "I guess I do owe you all an explanation," he conceded, as Bijou released her hold, looking up at Boss expectantly. "It's a long and convoluted and somewhat sordid story, but it all starts three years ago."

"You were just a boy back then, really," Amy smiled. "And I was just a girl. And you thought it would be fun to make your own little boys' club."

"It wasn't a little boys' club!" Boss rebuked. "It was a man's club. For macho men. And the members called themselves the CATS."

"It stood for 'Creating A Tougher Society,'" Amy explained. "But it didn't really mean anything at that time. They actually came up with the acronym before they decided what it stood for, just so they could

say they were CATS."

"And I was the leader of the CATS, initially," Boss continued. "But then Scuzz joined the group. He thought that we weren't living up to our name -- not really 'Creating A Tougher Society.' He had his own ideas of how the club should be run, and amassed somewhat of a following, a group of punk ass kids like himself that soon took over the club and turned it into more of a sort of gang."

"I was Scuzz's girlham at the time," Amy said. Howdy and Dexter gave her startled looks. "I know, I know it seems crazy, based on what you've seen of him," Amy continued. "But love is blind, as they say, and I was too blind to realize how much of a monster he was until..." Her voice broke then, and she looked as though she might start crying. Boss wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Until it was too late." Valiantly holding back a flood of tears, Amy recounted her last evening as Scuzz's girl.

* * *

><p>(AN: This is a flashback--!)</p>

The night had started off like any other. The CATS had been up to their usual mischief, and in the evening Scuzz appeared at Amy's home ready to regale her with tales of his bravery and general badassery. She always listened to his stories with rapt attention, but lately they'd been starting to get to her. The CATS were doing worse and worse things each day, and Scuzz always seemed excited to tell her about them. In particular, tonight he was in the middle of telling Amy about how the CATS had beaten a dissenter (the term they used to refer to anyone who questioned their illicit activities) half to death when she interrupted him.

"Scuzz, I can't do this anymore. I love you, but -- you're so full of hate and violence. It's been getting worse every day. You didn't used to be like this."

"What are you talking about?" Scuzz demanded. "Don't you know that the CATS stand for what's right? Anyone who opposes us deserves a thousand times worse than what we give them."

"I-I'm not sure that's true," she replied hesitantly. "I don't think you know the difference between right and wrong."

The blood began to boil in Scuzz's veins then. Without warning, he slapped Amy across the face, hard, leaving her cheek red and throbbing. She turned away from him, holding her burning face in her paws.

"Leave, Scuzz. I don't want to be with you anymore."

There was a brief moment in which neither of them said a word or moved a muscle. Then, suddenly, Scuzz was on top of her, tackling her to the ground. He pinned both of her arms to the ground and glared deep into her amethyst eyes.

"Fine, I'll leave," he growled. "But not before I take from you what you've failed to give me the entire time we've been together."

"Scuzz, no!" Amy shrieked, but she could do nothing to overpower him. He would have his way, just as Scuzz always did.

* * *

><p>(AN: End flashback.)_

"He...he _raped_ you?" Bijou whimpered, her eyes wide.

Amy nodded and brushed a tear from her cheek. "That's not even the worst of it," she continued. "The next day, I went to my brother, Andre, and told him everything. Andre had never liked the fact that I was dating one of the CATS, and he was more than happy to have a reason to take on Scuzz and, he hoped, knock him down a peg. But instead..." Amy's voice cracked and she looked down at the ground. She began to sob softly.

"Andre didn't realize that Scuzz doesn't play by the rules, doesn't fight fair," Boss continued for her. "He went in expecting a one-on-one fistfight. Scuzz had his knife ¯ and a small army of CATS."

"You mean...?" Howdy began.

"They took him down effortlessly," Boss sighed, and Amy's sobs grew louder. "I...I was there. I saw the whole thing. But I was too much of a coward to stop them, afraid I would lose my own life. And they...they just killed him. No second thoughts, no questions. Just killed him for defending his sister's dignity." And I've had to relive it these last three nights in my dreams, he thought to himself.

"So...Scuzz is a murderer," Dexter said.

"And a rapist," Bijou added.

"And a kidnapper," Howdy pointed out.

"Yeah, that's what we're up against, unfortunately," Boss replied. "No crime is too heinous or depraved for Scuzz. He'll literally stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"So, it's pretty much hopeless then," Howdy said.

"We're doomed," Dexter agreed.

"Wait," Bijou said. "What exactly is it that he wants, anyway?"

There was an uncomfortable silence among them. Then Boss sighed, looked down at the ground in front of him and muttered, "You. He's here for you, Bijou."

Bijou gasped, taken aback by Boss's words. "But I don't understand! Why me? What does he want with me?"

"After the...incident," Boss began, "Amy turned to me for support. Her brother dead, her boyham having betrayed her, I was all she had left. We had been friends for some time and she needed someone to help her cope with everything that had happened. We left town

together, set out on our own to start a new life...but Scuzz still wanted Amy for himself. In his eyes, I had stolen his most prized possession."

"And so now," Amy sniffled, wiping the last few tears from the corners of her eyes, "Scuzz wants to do the same to Boss. Take away the one thing he loves most dearly." She turned her soft gaze to Bijou. "And that's you."

Bijou was speechless. She looked from Boss to Amy and back. After a moment of stark silence, she took a deep breath and spoke. "Boss, is that true? Youâ€| love me?"

Boss turned away from Bijou as the color rose in his cheeks, unable to offer a reply.

Bijou turned back to Amy. "And how canâ€| how can Scuzz claim that he loved you, after the way he treated you?"

Amy sighed. "Scuzz has aâ€| different way of expressing his affection," she replied. "I think he did love me. But more as an object, to be used however he pleased, than as a fellow hamster."

Bijou pondered this for a moment, then continued: "And during the time you and Boss spent together, after you ran away from Scuzz and the CATSâ€| were youâ€| together?"

Amy blushed and glanced towards Boss, who returned her gaze briefly before looking away again. "You meanâ€| as a couple?"

Bijou nodded.

"Well, weâ€| " Amy began. "Er, that is to sayâ€| "

"I'd take that as a yes," Howdy interjected, and Amy found this to be sufficient and gave up trying to find a better explanation.

"Then why did you not stay together?" Bijou demanded now, her brow furrowed.

"In truth," Amy replied, "It was all just too painful. I loved being with Boss, but at the same timeâ€| whenever I was with him, I couldn't get away from the memories of Scuzz, and my brother, and everything terrible that had happened."

"So what made you come back?" Dexter asked. "Perfect timing, by the way."

"Iâ€| don't really know, honestly," Amy replied. "I just had this feeling, this little voice in the back of my head telling me that something bad was going to happen to Boss. And though we'd separated some time ago, I knew where he was living now, so it wasn't hard to find him. But I found Scuzz first â€" managed to stay hidden and eavesdrop on his plans, which was how I was able to get to Bijou before he did."

Howdy raised an eyebrow at her. "You knew everything Scuzz and his gang were planning?"

Amy sighed. "I know, I'm sorry," she replied. "But it's not as though I can be in two places at once. In the amount of time I had, I could have either come to your rescue or Bijou's. And I knew they weren't planning on killing you, whereas I have no idea what Scuzz would do if he were to get his paws on Bijou. Though if I had known how much they were going to rough you upâ€¦Wait, that reminds me." Amy reached into the pouch at her waist and produced a small bottle of ointment. "Here, this should help." She squeezed a drop of the ointment into her paw and began rubbing it into a small Scuzz-inflicted cut on Howdy's cheek.

Howdy was surprised at first at Amy's gentle touch and felt a slight blush creep across his face. Then he smiled.

"Dang, I could get used to this," he mused. Dexter cast him a sidelong glance.

"Don't worry, sweetie, you're next," Amy said with a smile in Dexter's direction.

As this was going on, Bijou had been pondering the question that was on everyone's minds. Finally, she grabbed a hold of Boss's paws, looked into his eyes and asked it.

"What do we do now?"

A silence filled the small burrow as it became evident that nobody had an answer. Boss sighed and squeezed Bijou's paws, trying to reassure her in whatever way he could.

"I don't know," he replied at length. "I don't know what Scuzz will do next. I don't think there's anywhere we can go where he won't find us. Maybe the only thing for me to do is to face him. To fight him."

Amy turned and looked at him. They shared a long, meaningful gaze. Boss knew what Amy was thinking; she couldn't stand the idea of the same thing happening to Boss that had happened to her brother, Andre. But she also knew that Boss was right; the only way to get rid of Scuzz for good was to stand up and fight.

"If you are going to fight Scuzz," she told him, "I want to fight with you."

Boss smiled and nodded. It was only fitting that they should take him on together, for better or worse. There was no telling what would come of it, but as long as they were at each other's sides they had the strength and the courage to do it.

6. A Love Remembered

Hi everyone! Man, I'm on a roll right now â€“ two updates in two days! (I uploaded the next chapter of Closer to Home yesterday, you should go check it out, hint hint.)

Anyway, enjoy this next chapter of The Nagging Dark, and if you have time please reviewâ€¦there's really no point in continuing to write this if nobody is reading it, so if you do read it, if you could take the time to just quickly tell me what you think of it so far, that

would be fantastic. Thanks!

-Genie

* * *

><p>Despite the general air of uneasiness, the five hamsters were eventually able to get to sleep, knowing that they would need all of their strength for the day to come. Boss, however, was still experiencing his recurring dream of Andre's death and his inability to stop it, and once again awoke violently in the midst of it.</p>

Breathing heavily and attempting to compose himself, Boss felt a comforting warmth and realized that Bijou had fallen asleep leaning against him. He smiled to himself and then looked up, taking stock of the burrow. Having spent a good portion of his life underground, Boss had developed excellent night vision and his eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness around him. On the opposite side of the burrow, Howdy and Dexter were also fast asleep, snuggled against each other for warmth. Amy, however, was nowhere to be found.

"Amy?" Boss whispered into the darkness. No response. Gently and without waking her, Boss moved Bijou onto the floor of the burrow and made his way aboveground, where Amy's scent led him. Once he was there, it didn't take him long to find her. She was leaning against a tree not far from the burrow, silent and apparently deep in thought. She jumped a bit when Boss appeared beside her.

"Boss!" she gasped, putting a paw to her heart to steady herself.
"You startled me."

"Well, you had me worried, so I guess we're even," Boss replied. "I woke up and you weren't in the burrow. What are you doing out here?"

"Justâ€|thinking," she replied, looking away from Boss and into the darkness of the woods beyond.

"Can't you do your thinking down there?" Boss retorted, motioning in the direction of the burrow. "What if Scuzz does come after us tonight? What if he finds you just standing out here?"

"Wellâ€|" Amy seemed hesitant to answer. "Iâ€|I thought that if Scuzz were to find me, maybe then he would leave you alone. You know, that maybe if I went back to him, then you and Bijou would no longer be in danger."

"That's crazy talk and you know it," Boss replied. "You know Scuzz. He revels in the pain he causes others. All he wants right now is to hurt me by hurting Bijou, and not even you can stop him from wanting that."

Amy sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry, I justâ€|I guess I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe I was hoping that Scuzz had changed since back then."

"Oh, yeah, he's changed all right," Boss said sarcastically. "You are aware that he just kidnapped two of my friends and held them for ransom, the ransom being Bijou, right?"

Amy was staring at the ground. Boss noticed that there were tears in her eyes and put a tentative paw on her shoulder.

"Amy, you're not still in love with him, are you?"

Amy looked up at him. "You've got to be kidding me," she replied. "Boss, he killed my brother. I would have to be out of my mind to still love that bastard. No," she shook her head, the tears tracing shiny trails down her cheeks. "I could never love him again, even if he had changed." She lifted a paw and placed it on top of Boss's, which was still resting on her shoulder.

Boss felt a familiar sensation then, a tingle that made his breath catch in his throat and his heart skip a beat. He knew he had to ask her the question on his mind, though he was afraid to hear the answer.

"Then, do you do you still love me?"

Amy sighed and squeezed Boss's paw tight, as if she never wanted to let go. Then she looked deep into his eyes, her own eyes now overflowing with tears.

"Boss, you're the only one who has ever shown me real love," she replied, trembling. "How could I ever stop loving you?"

Boss took her face in his paws then, returning her gaze fully, watching the light of the moon reflected in her eyes as it danced and swam in the tears coursing down her face. He wanted more than anything to kiss her, to remember her taste. But it would be wrong, wouldn't it?

Instead, he pulled her closer and wrapped her in his arms, his chin resting on top of her head. She returned the embrace, gripping the fur at his back for dear life, burying her face in his chest and letting the tears flow freely.

After a few moments, when Amy's sobs had subsided, she released Boss from her grasp and pulled away. She let out a few sniffles, wiped the last of the tears from her eyes and looked at him with an attempt at a smile.

"You really love Bijou, don't you?"

"I ..." Boss began. He tried to decide how to answer. He wasn't sure he even knew the answer. "I thought I did," he finally replied, "until you showed up. Now I'm not sure what to think."

"You can't let yourself fall for me again!" Amy told him. "You could have such a happy life with Bijou. You could never have that with me."

"But I don't know how Bijou feels about me, or if there is even a chance of us being together," Boss replied. "And who says we couldn't be happy together? I know that there's a lot of pain there for you, Amy, but once this whole thing is over, well, maybe we could work past it. Together."

Amy was silent for a moment, studying his face in the warm glow of

the moonlight. She could read his eyes just as clearly as ever, and it was plain to see that all the love he had felt for her back then was still there. She wanted to believe that they could be happy together, that this whole mess would wrap itself up in a nice, neat little package and everything would be fine and dandy again. But that was wishful thinking, and nothing more.

"That's just like you, Boss," she said finally. "The eternal optimist." Amy sighed and took Boss' paws in her own. "But who knows how this is going to end? Who knows if we'll even still be alive when it's all over?"

"Don't talk like that!" Boss replied, squeezing her paws in reassurance. "We've already made it through so much together. We're going to work this one out, too."

"But the last time I went against Scuzz, Andre wound up dead!" Amy cried, unable to stop the tears that were now returning to her eyes. "Maybe this time it will be you, or me, or both of us!"

Boss didn't know what to say, so he simply wrapped Amy in his arms and let her cry into his fur. Maybe she was right. Maybe there just wasn't going to be a happy ending.

* * *

><p>The first traces of sunlight were making their way into the burrow when Boss awoke the following morning. He and Amy had returned to the safety of the den and to sleep soon after their encounter that night. He glanced about the burrow and saw that the others were beginning to awaken as well, stretching and yawning as consciousness overtook them.</p>

"Good morning," Amy whispered softly to him, placing a paw on his shoulder and managing a weak smile. He returned the smile and stood up.

"I'm going to get some fresh air," he said, then made his way to the burrow entrance. He had only been gone for a moment when his voice penetrated the burrow again, now loud and alarmed.

"Oh my God!"

Upon hearing his exclamation, Amy sprang to her feet and ran to his side. Bijou, Howdy and Dexter were now wide awake as well, sharing anxious glances as they waited for Boss and Amy to return with an explanation. When neither did, Bijou nervously got to her feet and went to join them outside.

A few seconds passed while Howdy and Dexter remained motionless in the den, a tense silence filling the air around them. Then they heard Bijou scream, a terrified, terrifying sound.

"Pashmina!" Bijou was sobbing now. "Oh, God, Pashmina!"

Hearing her name, Howdy and Dexter exchanged horrified glances, then sprang to their feet and dashed to the burrow's entrance.

The first thing they saw was Amy, a paw pressed to her mouth in shock, the color drained from her face. She was shaking, staring at

something on the ground nearby. Then they saw Bijou, who had fallen backwards into Boss' arms. She was sobbing. Boss was attempting to comfort her, but having no success, as he appeared to be on the verge of a complete breakdown himself.

And then they saw what it was that had caused these reactions. Howdy saw it first and grabbed Dexter's arm with a grip nearly strong enough to cut off his circulation. Then Dexter caught sight of it and immediately fell to his knees, aghast.

There on the grass in front of them was a tattered pink scarf, streaked with blood.

7. Apprehension

Hey folks - I'm going to re-upload all of the chapters to this fic now that I know how to put these pagebreak thingies between sections. It was really annoying me that FFN took away all of my pagebreaks. Stupid FFN. So I'm going to fix it so it doesn't keep bothering me. I might do the same thing with CTH too at some point.

* * *

><p>For a moment, there was nothing but silence, punctuated here and there by Bijou's sobs. Nobody could find the right words to say, or even a voice to say them withâ€¦until someone else spoke up.</p>

"I know where she is."

All heads turned in the direction the voice had come from, and standing there with an apprehensive expression on his face was Rei, the youngest (and smallest) of the CATS.

"You meanâ€¦" Dexter began, gazing at Rei through the tears clouding his vision, "she's alive?"

Rei started to answer, but suddenly Howdy was at his throat, gripping the fur at Rei's chest with the ferocity of a wild animal.

"What have you done to her?" he demanded.

"Iâ€¦I didn't do anything," Rei replied, stuttering and trying in vain to free himself from Howdy's grasp. "S-Scuzz and the othersâ€¦"

"Howdy, let him go!" Dexter said, trying to insert himself between Howdy and Rei but having no luck. Seconds later, Boss and Amy were on top of Howdy, pulling him off of Rei, who appeared to be truly terrified.

"Get out of here," Boss growled at Rei, who obediently turned tail and ran. The others watched in silence as he disappeared amongst the countless bushes and trees.

"Damn it," Dexter muttered, and turned to Boss. His face was streaked with tears. "What if he was telling the truth? What if Pashmina is alive?"

Boss shook his head. "You know what Scuzz is like. The rest of the

CATS aren't any better. Rei might be a good actor, but I doubt there's anything else about him that's any good."

"We can't be sure," Amy said. "Maybe he was trying to help. Maybe there is good in him." She sighed and looked down at her feet as two tiny rivers of tears began falling down her cheeks. "But we can't risk it. It could have been a trap â€""

"It probably was a trap," Boss corrected.

"Shoulda let me give him what for," Howdy said angrily. "That little son of a bitchâ€!"

There was silence among them for a moment. Then it became apparent that Bijou was the only one who hadn't spoken a word that entire time. Boss turned to her anxiously; she was curled up in a ball, her face wet with tears, Pashmina's torn and tarnished scarf wrapped around her neck.

"Bijouâ€|" Boss whispered, kneeling down in front of her and putting a paw on her shoulder.

"Iâ€|I can still feel her warmth in it," she said, choking back more tears. "Pashminaâ€|"

Boss looked over his shoulder at Amy, as though she had some answer, some way to magically make everything right. But she could only return his mournful gaze with her own. So Boss took Bijou's paws in his and stood up, pulling Bijou to her feet in the process.

"Maybe she's at home," he told her. "Let's go to Pashmina's house and see if she's home."

"Do you really thinkâ€|?" Bijou started to say. Boss took her face in his paws and did his best to soothe her.

"I don't know," he said. "But this is only her scarf. That's all. There's no reason we should be fearing the worst already."

Bijou nodded and tried desperately to calm her petrified heart as she and the others set a course for Pashmina's house.

* * *

><p>Hamtaro was, at this time, pacing back and forth on Oxnard's windowsill. Oxnard was watching him apprehensively from his cage below the window.</p>

"I just can't do this anymore, Oxy," Hamtaro was saying. "I know Boss wanted us to stay away from him for a while, but I can't take it!"

"It's only been one day," Oxnard pointed out. "We could just give it a little more timeâ€|"

"One day, one week, what difference does it make?" Hamtaro replied. "Something is up with Boss and I don't like it and I think that as his friends, we deserve to know what's going on."

"I guess," Oxnard said noncommittally, clearly uneasy about the whole

thing.

"Well, come on then!" Hamtaro said, throwing his paws in the air.
"We're going to the clubhouse and find out what's up."

Obediently but tentatively, Oxnard exited his cage and followed Hamtaro down from the windowsill, across the street and through the woods to the clubhouse. As they approached, they noticed something distinctly different in the air, unusual and unfamiliar scents.

"Hamtaro," Oxnard whispered anxiously as they reached the clubhouse door. "I don't think we should go in. It doesn't feel right. We should go home."

"Nonsense!" Hamtaro replied, indifferent to the obvious change in the atmosphere surrounding the place. He pushed the door open, and light spilled into the tunnel.

"Boss!" Hamtaro shouted into the room. "Oxnard and I â€“" He stopped abruptly as several unfamiliar faces appeared in front of him.

"Welcome," one of them said in a none-too-friendly voice.

"_I want to go home_," Oxnard whispered from behind Hamtaro. He was shaking. Hamtaro, however, was not so put off.

"Hi!" he said brightly. "I'm Hamtaro. I came to talk to Boss. Are you friends of his?"

"You could say that," the stranger replied. "Boss and I go _way_ back." As he was speaking, another one of the unfamiliar hamsters shuffled behind Oxnard and closed the clubhouse door abruptly, shutting them in. Oxnard was now on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but Hamtaro took no notice.

"The name's Scuzz," the strange hamster finished, and held out a paw. Hamtaro took it without question and with a giant grin on his face â€“ which quickly disappeared when, rather than shaking his paw, Scuzz threw him to the ground with a sneer.

"G-good joke, heheh," Hamtaro said as he started to pull himself to his feet, but then Scuzz pressed a foot to his chest, pinning him to the ground. He lowered his face so that the two of them were eye to eye, and it suddenly became dreadfully apparent to Hamtaro that this 'Scuzz' was no friend of Boss, and things were somehow a lot worse than he had anticipated.

"I'm not joking around," Scuzz growled. "And now you're playing by my rules."

8. Hope and Heartache

Look! It's chapter 8!

But before you start reading it - I wanted to give a quick shout-out to **let-boss-find-love**, who has apparently become my number one fan and even dedicated a story to me (you should go check it out,

it's called 'Partner' and it is an adorable little slice of D/H goodness). So yes - thank you, **let-boss-find-love**! I hope you keep reading and enjoying 'The Nagging Dark'!

* * *

><p>It was late morning, and the sun was beating down on the town square. Outside the bookstore, beneath the shade of a small tree tucked away from the busy streets, a lone hamster was deep in thought behind a thick textbook. His concentration was broken, however, by a familiar, if anxious, voice shouting his name.</p>

"Maxwell!" Sandy was racing down the street towards him. She was sweating buckets, and her usually upbeat and cheerful persona had been replaced with an aura of absolute distress. Maxwell set his book aside and got to his feet just in time to catch Sandy as she ran into his arms.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, genuinely concerned.

"I don't know," she answered. "I don't know." She twisted out of his grasp and sat down with her head in her paws. Maxwell sat down beside her.

"Tell me what's going on," he prodded.

"It's...Bijou," Sandy replied. "A-and Pashmina. The three of us, we were going to meet up at Bijou's house today since we can't go to the clubhouse, butâ€|they'reâ€|they're gone!"

"What do you mean, 'gone'?"

"I went to Pashmina's house. She's not there. Same with Bijou." Sandy sniffled a bit. "I don't know what's going on."

"Hmm." Maxwell pondered this for a moment. "I wonderâ€|"

Sandy watched him curiously, waiting for him to finish his thought, but he merely trailed off and fell silent. After a long pause, Sandy waved a paw in front of his face to bring him back down to earth.

"Hello?" she said. "You were saying?"

"Well, I don't know, really," Maxwell replied. "But I was wondering if this might have anything to do with how weird Boss was acting yesterday."

"I thought he was just sick or something?" Sandy asked.

"That's what he would have us think," Maxwell answered. "But I don't think that was the crux of it. I'm pretty sure something is going on with Bossâ€|up here." He pointed to his head.

"Shouldn't we check up on him or something then?" Sandy asked.

"These things have to be handled with delicacy," Maxwell replied. "We can't just attack the problem head on, he'll only deny it. That's why I've been trying to do some research. Reading up on psychoanalysis."

He gestured to the heavy book he had been studying before the interruption.

Sandy examined the cover. "Sigmund Freud? Really?"

Maxwell nodded. "It's amazing I was able to find a hamster-sized copy." He stood up and stretched, then held out a paw to Sandy. She took it, and he pulled her to her feet.

"But I don't know for sure whether Boss' behavior has anything to do with your situation. It's just been weighing on my mind. For now, maybe we should head to Penelope's house and see if Pashmina is there."

Sandy's expression brightened a bit. "Iâ€| hadn't even thought of that," she said. "Good idea. Let's go."

* * *

><p>Boss' expedition to Pashmina's house had ended up as predicted: no sign of Pashmina anywhere, just as Sandy had seen for herself a short time earlier. Bijou had had the same idea as Maxwell, though â€“ maybe she was at Penelope's, and they would find her there. And so it was that as Sandy and Maxwell approached Kylie's house, they were greeted by a pair of familiar faces.</p>

"Boss!" Sandy gasped. "Bijou!"

"Sandy!" Bijou cried, and threw herself at her friend. She broke down into a fit of sobs as soon as Sandy's arms closed around her.

"I was looking for you earlier!" Sandy exclaimed. "What in the world is going on? And why are you wearing Pashmina's scarf?"

Trembling, Bijou pulled away from her, removed the scarf and held it out for Sandy to see plainly.

"Oh my Godâ€|" Sandy whispered, seeing the dark red stains here and there among the familiar pink cloth. She raised a paw to her face in shock and looked at Bijou with tears in her eyes. "Isâ€|is sheâ€|?"

Bijou shook her head. "I don't know," she whispered. "This is all we found."

"Ok, something is obviously very wrong here!" Maxwell shouted. There was anger in his voice. "Boss, what the _hell_ is going on? Who is she?" He gestured to Amy. "And when were you planning to let us in on your secrets?"

"Amy. Her name is Amy, and she's an old friend of mine," Boss began. "And you're right, Max." He sighed. "I shouldn't have tried to hide things from the rest of you, and for that I'm sorry. But I only did it to protect you; I was trying to keep everyone from getting swept up in something that should have only involved myself and Amy."

"Well, you've done a damn fine job of that, haven't you?" Maxwell sighed, drew a deep breath and composed himself. "I'm sorry, Boss. I know you would never intentionally let anyone get hurt."

"No, you're right," Boss said. "Iâ€|I don't even know what's happened to Pashmina. I inadvertently put Bijou in grave peril already, and Howdy and Dexterâ€|_SHIT!_" He stopped talking abruptly and looked about frantically. "Where the hell did they go? Damn it, how did I let those two out of my sight?"

Amy grabbed his arm and attempted to calm him down. "I'll bet you anything they snuck off to go chase after Rei in hopes of finding Pashmina," she told him. "Listen, I'll go track them down. The rest of you stay here, I should be back soon." Without another word she turned and disappeared back in the direction from which they had come.

* * *

><p>"Where are you going?"</p>

Dexter jumped, startled, and turned around to find Howdy staring him down.

"Were you following me?" Dexter demanded.

"Of course I was following you!" Howdy shouted. "You think you're sneaky, but I knew the second we got to Pashmina's house and she wasn't there that you were gonna go looking for Rei. You really think it's safe to be wandering off on your own at a time like this?"

"I don't care if it's safe or not," Dexter replied. "I need to find Pashmina."

Without hesitation, Howdy grabbed Dexter by the shoulders hard enough to make Dexter cringe. There was anger in his eyes, but also fear, and compassion, and a desperate pleading expression.

"You listen to me," he said, trembling. "Scuzz almost killed you once already. You remember?" Howdy lifted a finger to Dexter's neck, mimicking the blade Scuzz had pulled on him during his 'negotiations' with Boss.

"I _know_," Dexter said, brushing Howdy's paw aside. "But if Pashmina is still alive, I have to take that chance."

"No, you don't!" Howdy replied. "Rei is one of them, don't you understand that? That whole 'playing innocent' thing, you're really going to fall for that?"

"Well, what if it wasn't a trick? What if he was telling the truth?"

"But what if he _wasn't_?" Howdy barked. "If he wasn't, and you go off willy-nilly following him, you're dead, you understand?"

For the first time, Dexter noticed that there were tears in Howdy's eyes. And at that moment, all of the anger in Howdy's expression disappeared; he relinquished his hold on Dexter's shoulders, rested his forehead against Dexter's chest and cried.

Dexter was taken somewhat aback and unsure what to do. After a moment he put a tentative paw on Howdy's shoulder, and Howdy lifted his head

and looked him in the eyes once more.

"When I thought Scuzz was going to kill you before," Howdy said, sniffling a bit, "it tore me up inside, okay? And I can't face that possibility again. I care just as much about Pashmina as you do, but â€“ but if she's already dead, and then you were to die, too â€“ well, shit, there wouldn't be anything left for me to live for."

Dexter sighed. Damn it, what was he supposed to say after a speech like that?

"Okay," he finally replied. "In that case, come with me. If we die, we die together, and that's that. But if Pashmina is alive, then we'll find her."

Howdy punched him lightly on the shoulder; then, after a moment's hesitation, he made his decision.

"Alright, you win. Let's do this."

* * *

><p>Woo, chapter 8! A little bit longer than chapter 7. Slowly but surely I am bringing everyone into this mess.</p>

Also, this is not intended to be a D/H fic as the main emphasis is on Boss' relationships...but somehow I managed to sort of get some D/H fluff in there without intending to...

Anyway. Review please! And I will have another chapter up within a week, I think. I hope.

9. Turnabout

"So let me see if I've got this straight," Maxwell was saying, brow furrowed, arms crossed in front of him. "Amy is an old flame of yours, and her incredibly evil ex-boyfriend, who raped her and then murdered her brother, is now hunting down Bijou in an attempt to get revenge on you for a perceived personal slight?"

"That's pretty much the gist of it," Boss replied with a sigh.

They were sitting on the windowsill outside Kylie's room. Their hopes of finding Pashmina at Penelope's house had been dashed, and Bijou and Sandy were currently attempting to console a bawling Penelope, who clearly sensed that something was horribly wrong. She was already considerably upset when they arrived, probably because her best friend had not come to visit her, as was the norm. And, seeing how distraught the others were once they failed to find any trace of Pashmina, Penelope's temperament had only worsened.

"Wellâ€¦what do we do now?" There was a pain in Maxwell's voice that cut Boss to the core.

"Wait for Amy to get back, first of all, I guess," he replied. "Maybe she'll know what to do."

There was silence between them for a moment. The girls had managed to quiet Penelope down, and for that brief pause the only audible sound was the light breeze teasing through the trees. It seemed as if even the birds were in a somber mood and had fallen silent.

"Are you sure it was ok to let Amy go on her own to find Howdy and Dexter?" Maxwell asked worriedly, breaking the thick silence.

"I hope," Boss answered. "They couldn't have gotten far right?"

* * *

><p>Rei's scent was still recognizable, and it was easy enough for Howdy and Dexter to trace it, weaving here and there amongst the trees. Eventually it brought them to a hollow tree trunk. The pair sidled up to the bark as quietly as possible and peered inside. Two figures were visible in the shadowy interior, and soon the voices belonging to them became audible as well.</p>

"I don't know what to do," the first one was saying; Howdy and Dexter immediately recognized it as Rei's.

"Everything's going to be ok," the second one replied weakly, and it was immediately clear that Rei was not the evil hell-spawn that Scuzz was.

"Pashmina!" Howdy shouted, bustling into the tree trunk with Dexter on his heels. Pashmina was sitting against the inside wall of the tree trunk. Howdy threw himself at her, nearly knocking the wind out of her as he wrapped his arms around her neck. Within seconds, Dexter was at her side as well.

"Thank God you're alive," he told her, taking hold of one of her paws, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Hi guys," Pashmina replied, smiling weakly. As Howdy drew back and got a good look at her for the first time, he noticed that her torso was wrapped in bandages. All along her right side, the bandages were stained crimson by blood soaking through.

"Shit," Howdy gasped. "Pashy, are you ok?"

She nodded. "I'll live, thanks to Rei here."

Howdy and Dexter both turned to face Rei, finally acknowledging his presence. Rei wasn't looking at them, but staring at the ground in front of him and fidgeting nervously.

Howdy approached him and lifted a paw, offering a handshake. Rei stared blankly back at him for a moment, then accepted Howdy's paw and shook it timidly.

"I'm sorry for attacking you earlier," Howdy said. "I owe you for this."

Rei drew back and shook his head furiously. "No! You don't owe me anything. I'm a worthless piece of shit. All I'm doing is trying to make up for my mistakes as best as I can, but nothing I could do will ever be enough." He turned away just as tears began rolling down his face.

"What are you talking about?" Dexter asked. "You saved her life."

"But I didn't even try to stop them," Rei replied. "I let them hurt her. I let them hurt you. I'm a coward and a failure."

"Rei," Pashmina whispered. She had found the strength to stand and was at his side now, resting a paw on his shoulder. "You're just a kid. There's no way you could have fought them all off without risking your own life. And I will always be grateful to you for saving mine."

He held her gaze for a moment, then, sobbing, threw his arms around her.

"Shh," Pashmina whispered, stroking his head affectionately. "You're ok, hun. I'm ok. No need to fret."

After a moment, Rei's sobs subsided and he released Pashmina from his grasp, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his paw.

"Soâ€|what happened, anyway?" Dexter asked, breaking the silence.

"It's all sort of a blur, it happened so fast," Pashmina replied. "I was on my way to visit Penelope â€“ she's been lonely ever since Boss kicked us all out of the clubhouse, you know â€“ and all of a sudden this gang of mean-looking hamsters was standing in front of meâ€!"

"Scuzz and the CATS," Howdy postulated. Rei nodded.

"Well, they started chasing me," Pashmina continued. "I couldn't outrun them for long. And then they were grabbing me, and I saw someone had a knife, and I was trying to escape and there was some confusion and then I just felt this searing painâ€!" She glanced down at the stained red bandages at her side. "And then I just lost it. I fainted. I thought I was done for. But when I woke up I was here, and Rei was here, and I was still alive."

"When she lost consciousness, I think Scuzz must have thought she was dead," Rei said. "Either that, or he knew she would bleed to death anyway and just left her there to die."

"But you didn't let me die," Pashmina smiled at him. "Though they did take my scarf, for whatever reasonâ€!"

"As a warning," Rei replied. "Scuzz wanted Boss to find it, to let him know that he can and will start killing if Boss doesn't cave."

"That's sick," Howdy muttered.

"No kidding," Dexter agreed.

"So that's my story," Pashmina finished. "Now what the hell happened to the two of you? You're not exactly in the best of conditions either."

"Oh, more or less the same thing that happened to you," Dexter said. "Except that instead of being left to die, we were kidnapped and became the subjects of some intense hostage negotiations."

"That's terrible!" Pashmina gasped.

"Yeah, fun story," Howdy said. "Although I think it was probably somewhat preferable to almost bleeding to death, in my opinion."

At that moment, their conversation was interrupted by a voice, calling from not far away.

"Rei," it said, "where are you? I know you're around here somewhere!"

Rei sat bolt upright. "Scuzz!" he whispered, fear in his voice.

Pashmina put a paw on his arm. She was trembling, but trying her best to remain calm.

"Maybe he won't find us if we stay hidden," she said. "If we just stay quiet."

"No," Rei replied. "Of course he'll find us." He looked at Howdy and Dexter. "The two of you found me easily enough. Scuzz is just toying with me. I have to go face him, otherwise he'll find all of us."

He stood up, took a deep breath, and left the three of them to wonder what would happen next.

* * *

><p>"Come on, Oxy, help me out here!"</p>

Hamtaro was pressing his full weight against Boss' bedroom door, panting and out of breath as he attempted to force the door open from the inside. The clubhouse was dark and deserted; Scuzz and the CATS had left some time ago, but not before tossing Hamtaro and Oxnard into Boss' room and securely barring the door shut from the other side.

Oxnard, true to form, was curled up in a ball of despair, tears flowing freely down his face as he watched Hamtaro's futile efforts. Hamtaro took a deep breath and a few steps back, then threw his shoulder against the door.

WHAM. The door didn't budge.

Hamtaro massaged his aching shoulder and shifted his gaze to Oxnard.

"If we both ram it at the same time, maybe it will work," he insisted. "Oxy?"

"I want to go home," Oxnard replied.

"Me too!" Hamtaro said. "And we'll get home faster if you help me!" He stepped back and tried once more to force the door

open.

WHAM.

"What if they come back and find us trying to escape?" Oxnard said, trembling. "Or what if we get out and one of them is waiting outside for us?"

"Would you rather just sit here and wait to find out what's gonna happen when they get back?"

"If you'd listened to me, we wouldn't even be here!" Oxnard pointed out. "I told you we shouldn't have come. I knew it was a bad idea."

WHAM.

Hamtaro slumped to the floor, defeated. It was apparent that he was getting nowhere but sore.

"I'm sorry, Oxy." Tears were welling up behind his eyes. "I justâ€|"

"I'm scared," Oxnard said, cutting him off.

"Me too," Hamtaro agreed. "Me too."

* * *

><p>"I'm here, Scuzz."</p>

Rei was trembling, but holding his ground as Scuzz approached him.

"Rei, Rei, Rei," Scuzz sighed, putting a paw on Rei's shoulder. "Where do you keep running off to, boy?"

Unable to come up with a reply, Rei merely stood there, holding Scuzz's malicious gaze with his own.

"You know," Scuzz continued, tightening his grip on Rei's shoulder. "If you keep disappearing on me, the other CATS might start getting the idea that you're aiding the enemy."

Rei was still shaking and speechless. Scuzz narrowed his eyes, glaring at him now.

"Well?" he demanded.

For a moment, Rei simply continued to stand there in silence. And then something awakened inside him, a little voice telling him it was now or never, do or die, and the angry monster that had been sleeping in the pit of his soul burst forth at Scuzz like a bat out of hell.

"What enemy?" Rei shouted. "What have any of them ever done to you? Wake up, Scuzz, you're the bad guy here!"

Fists flying, Rei leapt forward, ready to pour out all of his rage on Scuzz, but at that moment Mitch and Rock appeared from the shadows

and latched onto Rei's arms, holding him back.

"And you're a coward!" Rei spat, struggling violently against Mitch and Rock's unyielding grip. "You can't do anything without your stupid cronies, can you? Why can't you face me by yourself, Scuzz?"

Scuzz grabbed Rei by the throat. "Clearly, someone needs to learn some respect for his elders," he growled.

"Respect?" Rei gasped, barely able to speak with Scuzz's paw at his throat. "Why should I respect you? Why should anyone respect you?"

Scuzz had just about heard enough. Without warning, he delivered a swift and powerful punch to Rei's abdomen. Rei fell to his knees, gasping, as Scuzz drew back and prepared to strike again.

Pashmina, Howdy and Dexter were watching in horror from the relative safety of the hollow tree as the scene unfolded in front of them. When Scuzz started whaling on Rei, Pashmina decided she couldn't take it anymore. Despite her better instincts, she ran out from behind the tree and straight towards Scuzz; Howdy and Dexter had no choice but to follow her.

"Stop!" she cried, grabbing at Scuzz's arm in an attempt to rescue Rei from the barrage of blows that Scuzz was dealing. "You're going to kill him! Stop it!"

Scuzz turned on his heel and wrenched his arm from Pashmina's grip, throwing her to the ground in the same motion. At the same time, Chez and Ralph appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and rushed at Howdy and Dexter. Mitch released his hold on Rei and was immediately on top of Pashmina, grabbing her arm and forcing her to her feet.

The fight was over before it had even begun. Within seconds, Pashmina, Howdy and Dexter were caught, their arms pinned by Mitch, Chez and Ralph. Rock still had a firm grip on Rei, who remained on his knees, doubled over in pain. As soon as the commotion had died down, Scuzz approached the three intruders.

"Well, well, well," he said, looking first to Pashmina. "What do we have here?" He put a paw to the side of her face, smiling as she cringed and turned away from him. "I thought I'd taken care of you. Surprise, surprise."

"Don't touch her!" Howdy demanded. Scuzz turned his attention in Howdy's direction.

"And what are you going to do about it?" Scuzz chuckled, drawing his blade from its sheath and lifting it to Howdy's throat.

"Stop!" Dexter cried. "Don't â€""

"Don't what?" Scuzz asked. "Don't do this?" He pressed his blade to Howdy's throat, watching the horror rise in Dexter's eyes. Howdy bit his lip and attempted to hold back a pained groan as a thin sliver of red appeared and crawled down his neck.

"Damn it, stop!" Dexter demanded, attempting to wrench himself free

of Ralph's grip but failing miserably.

"Or what?" Scuzz snarled, removing his blade from Howdy's throat and admiring the shine of blood on its tip. Then he turned to Dexter, grabbed him by the chest and pressed his blade to Dexter's stomach, just lightly enough so as not to pierce the skin. "You think you have any power over me? You're weak. You're all weak. I should have killed you when I had the chance. But first things first." Scuzz turned away from Dexter and returned his attention to the trembling, gasping ball of fur that was Rei.

"Rei," Scuzz sighed, squatting down at Rei's side. "I had faith in you, kid. I trusted you, and you turned on me."

Rei managed to lift his gaze to Scuzz. The rage was still there in his eyes, just as fierce as before.

"Go to hell, Scuzz," he said.

Scuzz smirked. "You first," he replied, and lifted his blade to deliver a death blow.

"Stop!"

The voice had seemingly come from nowhere, but Scuzz recognized it immediately and it was enough to make him freeze in place. Slowly, he lowered his blade and turned around.

"Amethyst?"

Amy had appeared at the edge of the clearing. Soon she was at Rei's side, and she fell to her knees beside him, crying as she drew his wounded body into her arms.

"What are you doing here?" Scuzz demanded. He still had his blade in hand, but the viciousness and hatred in his eyes had faded as soon as he saw Amy.

"I should be asking the same of you!" Amy cried, glaring at him. "And what have you done to Rei? How could you do this, Scuzz?"

"He's a liar and a traitor," Scuzz hissed, fury now returning to his countenance. "He deserves nothing less!"

"How could you say that?" Amy sobbed, cradling Rei's head in her arms. "About your own son?"

Scuzz froze. Had he really just heard what he thought he had heard?

"Son?" he finally asked after a pause.

Amy nodded, glaring at him.

"You're insane," Scuzz scoffed. "I have no son. And even if I did, how would you know?"

"Because," Amy sobbed, staring at Scuzz through pained and pleading eyes, "I'm his mother!"

* * *

><p>Woo! Plot twist!</p>

Full disclosure: Amethyst is Amy's full name (in case you didn't catch that, not that it's of any major consequence).

let-boss-find-love: Sorry for the lack of Boss/Amy in this chapter. But there will most certainly be more to come. :)

Review, pl0x!

-Genie

10. Losing Control

Hey, I bet you all thought I was dead! But no, I am determined to finish this thing at some point. If anybody is actually reading this, please give me a holler and review._

Also, be forewarned in case you are sensitive to this type of thing, there is a bit more swearing in this chapter than usual. Amy has a bit of a mouth on her when she's angry - and she has very good reason to be angry. I don't think one F-bomb is enough to push this up to an M rating (I guess I haven't actually read the rating guidelines?), but if you are offended by things like that feel free to let me know and I'll work to avoid it in future chapters._

This chapter's a bit short but I really wanted to get the ball rolling on this again because I really do want to finish writing it! I know exactly how this is going to end, it just takes a lot of effort and free time (which I don't have a lot of these days) to get there. I am a 24 year old who writes Hamtaro fanfiction! What am I doing here at 2:30 AM on a Friday? Goodness knows!_

Sorry, please read. And review. Review please._

* * *

><p>A stark silence pervaded the clearing. The loudest sound audible was that of Rei's labored breathing as he fought to maintain consciousness. Amy turned away from Scuzz, pulling Rei closer to her until his face was buried in the warmth of her chest. Blood seeped from the corners of his mouth, staining Amy's fur an angry crimson.</p>

The self-satisfied smirk had disappeared from Scuzz's face as the gravity of Amy's words sank in. When the silence caught up with him, he cleared his throat and tried his best to look indifferent, unmoved by Amy's assertion.

"Even if what you say is true," he began, forcing a half-hearted shrug, "why should it matter? A traitor is a traitor, and that's all he is to me."

Amy's eyes narrowed as she turned a sharp gaze to Scuzz.

"You're colder than ever," she hissed through gritted teeth. She was

glaring at Scuzz steadily, her resolution unwavering, Rei now unconscious in her arms. It was unclear whether he had fainted from physical duress or the emotional trauma that came from discovering that Scuzz was his father; in all likelihood it was a combination of the two.

"That's awfully sweet of you to say," Scuzz grinned, regaining some of his earlier composure, though his voice had a wavering, uncertain edge to it that Amy immediately detected.

"You're afraid," she told him, her voice a low rumble rising from her chest. "You're scared that for once, you're not completely in control. That maybe, no matter how much you want to, you don't have it in you to murder your own flesh and blood."

A look of disbelief flashed across Scuzz's face; he instantly masked it with the same defiant smirk he always wore, but it was too late. Amy had seen the uncertainty rising within him. She knew she was right. Scuzz was evil — but not pure evil. Not without some semblance of a conscience, however small and neglected it may have been.

"You think I can't?" he began, his grip tightening around the handle of his blade. "You think I won't?"

"I know you can't!" Amy shouted, her words piercing him more sharply than any dagger could. "Because no matter how you may see him, you know that you're a part of him." She stood, positioning herself between Scuzz and Rei, her eyes aflame. "How does that make you feel, Scuzz? Knowing that your self-centered lusts created him? Knowing that no matter what you say or do or think, you, of your own power and volition, brought into this world a son who is better than you in every. Single. Fucking. Way?"

"Bitch!" Scuzz seethed, at a loss for any other retort, and leapt forward, blade in hand. Amy was too quick for him; she shifted backwards as the blade came down, then grabbed Scuzz by the wrist, wrenched his arm behind his back and came down on top of him as he fell face-first to the ground. For the first time, Scuzz had lost control. He'd overcompensated with ill-placed aggression and given Amy the window she needed to overpower him. She was kneeling on his back now, holding him down.

"Get off me!" he screamed at her, struggling to pull himself up. But with Amy's full weight pinning him down and his right arm — and blade — rendered useless against her grip, he was finding it exceedingly difficult.

Mitch was the first of Scuzz's minions to react, relinquishing his hold on Pashmina and darting towards Amy. Chez cast a nervous glance at Ralph, who at that very moment let out a sharp, pained gasp as Howdy brought his foot down, hard, against Ralph's. This gave Howdy enough leeway to slip free of Ralph's grasp, and then Pashmina surprised everyone when she grabbed a sizable branch from the ground nearby and, with a ferocious cry and more power than she knew she was capable of, brought it squarely to the back of Chez's head, barely missing Dexter's in the process.

Chez fell forward, unconscious. Dexter cast Pashmina a speechless look that was somewhere between "Thanks" and "Where the hell did that

come from?", and Ralph, realizing that he was suddenly outnumbered and overpowered, tried to make a break for it in the guise of following Mitch's lead, but fell to the ground, gasping and clutching his injured foot, when the pain turned out to be more than he had bargained for.

Rock had had the same idea as Mitch and was scrambling to Scuzz's aid, but as the two hamsters approached her, Amy wrenched Scuzz's blade from his paw, pressed it against the side of his throat, and screamed into his ear, "_Call them off!_"

Scuzz was relatively certain that Amy wouldn't kill him â€“ but at that moment, helpless against her power and feeling the cold touch of his own blade on his skin, he wasn't willing to take that risk.

"Stand down!" he called out, his voice hoarse and deflated. Mitch and Rock stopped in their tracks, within arm's reach of Amy but more than obliged to obey Scuzz's orders.

Pashmina, Howdy and Dexter were at Rei's side now. Pashmina was kneeling beside him and holding his head in her arms, searching his eyes for a sign of life, tears welling behind her own at the sight of him bloodied and bruised. Howdy had Pashmina's Chez-bashing branch slung over his shoulder for good measure. Amy turned her attention to the three of them.

"Go," she commanded. "Get out of here while you can. Find Boss. Get help."

"And leave you here?" Howdy replied. "We couldn't â€“"

"I can handle myself just fine!" Amy shouted back.

"But â€“" Dexter started, but Amy cut him off before he could continue.

"By my count," she huffed, exasperated, "I've saved both of your asses twice now. Don't you think maybe you should listen to what I'm telling you?"

Dexter glanced back at Howdy, defeated. She made a good point.

"What about Rei?" Pashmina cried.

"He'll be alright with me, I promise," Amy replied. "You'll make much better time without him."

"I can't leave him," Pashmina murmured, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Amy, he â€“ he saved my life."

Amy looked back at her, a stern but sympathetic expression in her eyes.

"Then don't let it be for nothing, honey," she sighed.

Howdy and Dexter turned to Pashmina, each taking a paw to pull her to her feet. The three of them turned to go, casting one final glance in Amy's direction. They all wanted to say something â€“ anything â€“ to thank her, but all the words they could think of seemed hollow and

empty. As it were, the gratitude and admiration Amy saw reflected in their eyes said more than any words could.

And as she watched them disappear among the trees, she let go. She dropped Scuzz's blade, and it hit the ground beside her with a soft thud. She stood, releasing Scuzz and raising her arms in surrender. She didn't know what would happen now; she could only hope that she was right about Scuzz, but she realized with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that she had underestimated him too many times before.

11. Sending A Message

Genie here. I'm still writing this? I'm still writing this. I know it's been forever since I updated, but I swear I'm going to finish this eventually. Will try to update more regularly from here on out. If anyone is still reading, it would be great to hear from you (i.e. review, or feel free to drop me a PM!).

* * *

><p>Scuzz threw the clubhouse door open using every ounce of strength in his body, the resulting crash reverberating throughout the room. Amy followed him, compliant but resolute, clutching the limp form of Rei to her chest. He was alive but still unconscious, and as Amy held him close, feeling the feeble but unwavering beat of his heart near her own, she couldn't help but imagine what it would have been like to feel that heartbeat every day of his life. To nourish him as a baby, watch him grow from a child into the strong and steadfast hamster he was now. She could have been a mother to him. She would have been, if she'd known the fate that awaited him, or thought there was any chance she could have given him a life worth living.

Amy squeezed her eyes shut, forcing back tears. She wouldn't let Scuzz see her crying, not now. She needed to be strong. For Rei.

Once inside the clubhouse, Amy lowered Rei gently into the armchair in the corner of the room. Then she turned to Scuzz, who was pacing near the door. Amy's sudden appearance and her assertion that Rei was his son had thrown him off, unsettled him. Scuzz had lost some of his former self-certainty and smugness and was markedly disconcerted. But when he saw Amy's eyes on him, he snapped to attention, lunged toward her, grabbed her firmly by the shoulders and threw her against the wall.

"_Why?_" he demanded, fuming.

Amy cringed as a sudden shockwave of pain cascaded down her back, and only found her voice to respond after it had dissipated.

"Why _what?_" she threw back at him.

"Don't play games with me," Scuzz hissed. "Why didn't you do it? You could have ended this. You had a knife to my throat. So why the _fuck_ didn't you just run it through?"

Amy hesitated. In truth, part of her wished she had killed him. He

was right, after all; she could have ended this. And oh, it would have felt so good. To feel his flesh break, watch his blood spill - finally, retribution. Vengeance for Andre, for Rei, for Boss, for anyone and everyone the bastard had ever hurt.

Amy caught herself. She shouldn't be thinking such things. Revenge, she knew, was the last resort of those with nothing else to live for, those like Scuzz himself.

"Because I'm better than that," she finally growled, allowing herself a little smirk. Scuzz wasn't having it. His grip tightened and he leaned closer until Amy could feel his breath against her face, hot, wet, livid.

"Better?!" he snarled. "Too good to kill? And where does that get you? You spare my life only to put your own and everyone else's back in the line of fire. How is that better?"

Amy sucked in a deep breath, willing back the hatred that was rising up inside her. She was determined to remain rational and composed. If she could talk Scuzz down, maybe - maybe - they could strike a deal.

"It doesn't have to be that way, Scuzz," she started. "I let you live so that we could work this out. I'm sure we can - "

"Work it out?" Scuzz spat. He narrowed his eyes, giving Amy a disparaging glare before releasing his grip on her shoulders. With a mocking shrug, he turned to Ralph and repeated Amy's words a second time. "'Work it out', she says."

Ralph humored him with a derisive grunt.

"Work. It. Out," Scuzz repeated a third time, spitting the words as if each one left a foul taste on his tongue. He turned back to Amy. His rage had subsided, and the tone of his voice had shifted from savage to sardonic. "Let me tell you something, sweetheart," he snarled. "We're not working anything out. No compromises. No arrangements. I'm getting what I came here for."

"And you can have it," Amy replied.

Scuzz regarded her with a bemused stare, waiting for her explanation.

"You want to take what Boss loves most, right?" Amy closed her eyes briefly, sighed, and then directed her gaze back at Scuzz. "Scuzz, I saw it in his eyes. He still loves me."

Scuzz was silent a moment, considering Amy's assertion. Then his lips curled in a devilish grin.

"You want me to take you instead of Bijou."

"I'm saying that if what you really want is to hurt Boss - "

"I assume you'd be willing to die in her place, then?"

Amy paused and glanced in Rei's direction. More than ever before, she suddenly had so much to live for. But what else could she

say?

"Yes," she sighed.

"_Ha!_" Scuzz threw his head back and let out a triumphant laugh, then regarded Amy with mock pity, shaking his head. "Amethyst, my little gem. That's your problem, isn't it? Your one real weakness. The one thing that kept you from being one of my CATS."

"I don't understand - "

"You're a strong woman, you know. You've proven you can best me in a fight. But you just care too much. That's why I'm still alive, isn't it? And that's why, if I wanted it, you'd be dead in a second."

"Caring isn't weakness," Amy retorted. "Love isn't weakness."

"Love is the ultimate weakness!" Scuzz spat back, and suddenly he was on top of her again, shoving her back against the wall. "The only way to survive in this world is without empathy, without compassion, without love. How do you think I got to be as powerful as I am? Without love. Without weakness."

Any had heard enough. Scuzz clearly wasn't about to accept her offer. She was done being rational and composed.

"I know your weakness," she asserted, grinning.

"Really?" Scuzz laughed, releasing her and crossing his arms in front of him. "Try me."

Without hesitation, Amy grabbed Scuzz by the shoulders and gave him a sharp, swift kick - right where it hurt the most.

Scuzz let out a gasp and doubled over in pain, crumpling to the floor. Mitch, who was leaning against the door with his arms crossed, let out an impulsive laugh, then bit his lip to staunch any further outbursts.

"What are you laughing about?" Scuzz demanded between pained gasps. "Get her! Lock her up, I don't care, just get her out of my sight!"

Amy had returned to Rei's side and was pulling him into her arms when Mitch grabbed her. She didn't resist as he dragged both of them toward Boss' room, but smiled broadly as she passed Scuzz, who was clambering awkwardly to his feet, still grimacing. He looked as though he wanted to rip her apart, but the pain prevented him from making any sudden moves. Instead, he called again to Mitch.

"Bring the prisoners out here," he commanded. "I have a message for Boss."

"Right away," Mitch replied. Ralph, Chez, and Rock had already removed the pile of furniture that had been used to barricade the door to Boss' room. Mitch pulled the door open and shoved Amy forward brusquely, then motioned to Hamtaro and Oxnard, who had been listening to Amy and Scuzz's conversation silently from within. Oxnard was

shaking. Hamtaro was trying his best to look defiant, his shoulders heaving as he drew deep, stabilizing breaths.

"You two. Out. Now." Mitch pointed back toward Scuzz.

"You can't tell us what to do!" Hamtaro protested, but Oxnard was already slinking out the door past Mitch. Hamtaro glanced at Amy, recognizing her as an ally. She returned his gaze with a soft, apologetic expression, then shook her head, at a loss for any words that might help to explain or ease the situation.

Once Hamtaro and Oxnard were both on the other side, Mitch slammed the door behind them, then leaned back against it. Scuzz, recovered from the blow Amy had delivered, was surveying his prisoners, smirking.

"Been trying to escape, have we?" He was eyeing Hamtaro's right shoulder, where a bruise was forming after his repeated attempts to force the door open. Hamtaro instinctively raised his left paw to his shoulder, covering the darkening flesh.

"I don't know who you are," he stammered, locking eyes with Scuzz, "but you can't keep us here. You're not going to win. Boss will be coming back soon, and he - "

"Glad you brought that up," Scuzz interjected. "In fact, that's exactly what I'm hoping for, and exactly why I called you out here." He paused for a moment, glancing at Oxnard.

Oxnard noticed Scuzz's narrowed eyes pointing in his direction and looked away, still shaking. He was making a valiant effort to compose himself, but still no words came.

"You must be the strong, silent type, eh?" Scuzz smirked. "No, strong is probably a bit of an exaggeration, wouldn't you say, Chubs?"

"His name is Oxnard!" Hamtaro shouted. His paws were balled into fists, his shoulders still heaving with each breath he took.

"Gee, thanks, Red," Scuzz replied with mock sincerity. "I'll remember that later when I'm slitting his throat."

Oxnard yelped, the color draining from his face.

"No!" Hamtaro shouted, throwing himself in front of Oxnard, his arms raised to his sides in a protective stance. "I won't let you touch him!"

"Then listen closely," Scuzz hissed, leaning forward and grabbing Hamtaro by the fur of his chest. "Since you appear to be the more verbose of the two of you - not to mention you look like you can probably run faster - you've just secured the position of my personal messenger."

"What do you mean?"

"When I say 'go', " Scuzz sneered, "you're going to high-tail it out of here as fast as your paws can carry you, find Boss, and tell him this: if he's not back here by sundown tonight, with Bijou, heads

will roll. Starting with his." With the paw that wasn't clutching a handful of Hamtaro's fur, Scuzz unsheathed his blade and jabbed it toward Oxnard for emphasis.

"Why Bijou?" Hamtaro pleaded. "What do you want with her?"

"No time for questions," Scuzz replied. "Now go!" With that, he released Hamtaro and shoved him in the direction of the clubhouse door.

"Hamtaro," Oxnard cried, turning to follow him, but Scuzz was quick to come between them.

"Mmm-mmm-mmm, not you," Scuzz reprimanded, raising his blade to Oxnard's throat. "You're my bargaining chip. You'll be staying right here."

"Hamtaro," Oxnard repeated, shrinking back from Scuzz and his blade. "Don't - you can't - "

Hamtaro looked back at him, his stomach in knots, searching for some way to allay the fear and desperation in Oxnard's eyes. Finding no words to ease the pain, he turned and, with tears streaming down his face, fled the clubhouse. His only thought, besides the lingering image of Oxnard's terrified expression as he left him behind, was of finding Boss.

End
file.